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IN NINETEENTH CENTURY
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WP 97-6

**COLONIAL FORMS OF LABOUR
ORGANISATION IN NINETEENTH CENTURY
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ABSTRACT

Australian unionism built upon strong foundations transported from Britain. Subsequently it grew beyond this base in scope and form. By 1890 the level of unionisation of the colonial workforce exceeded that in the mother country. This was mainly due to the upsurge of new unionism in the late 1880s. Although there were many parallels with the new unionism of Britain, the colonial variant was more extensive, preceded the British version and demonstrated its distinctive characteristics, such as a national level of bureaucracy, earlier. Australian new unionism was also far more successful initially than its British counterpart in developing extensive parliamentary representation based on the organisation of a Labor Party. The most significant example of Australian new unionism, the AWU, was also unique in many respects which led the Australian style of unionism further away from its British origins.

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By 1890 trade unions in New South Wales and Victoria, the two most populous and industrialised of the Australian colonies, enjoyed the highest membership density in the world. This success was based upon two main forms of organisation: one transplanted from the 'mother country', Britain; the other was a unique form of colonial organisation, which eventually proved more important in many respects.

EARLY ORGANISATION AND BRITISH INFLUENCE

The earliest colonial unions were craft-based. They first appeared in the 1830s and 1840s, but most could only claim continuous association from the time of the gold rushes in the 1850s. Craft unions were formed in the capital cities of the colonies amongst building, metal and printing tradesmen in particular, as well as some other trades such as the tailors, bootmakers, furniture makers, coachmakers, coopers, bakers and confectioners.¹

Throughout the nineteenth century a high proportion of these tradesmen were British immigrants, who brought with them 'the customs of the trade' as well as organisational norms.² Some

¹ The literature on the formation of Australian unions is fairly wide. For a summary, see R. Markey, 'Australia', in M. van der Linden and K. Rojahn (eds.), *The Formation of Labour Movements. An International Perspective, 1870-1914*, Brill, Leiden, pp. 579-608. The best single reference is still R. Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics. A Study of Eastern Australia, 1850-1910*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1966. Others appear below.

² The best source for trade customs as well as the structure and government of unions is their rule books. The 'Literary Appendix' of the *Report of the Royal Commission on Strikes*, Sydney, 1891 (hereafter *RRCS*, 1891), contains many summaries of rules submitted by unions, with those of the Bricklayers, Boot Trade, and Ironmoulders providing the best examples of 'customs of the trade'. Other good examples occurred in the printing trades, e.g. Sydney Typographical Association, *Rules*, 1881; and NSW Typographical Association, *Rules*, Sydney, 1889, 1896; or building trades,

trades recruited most of their labour force from skilled British immigrants, even towards the end of the century. Most of the building trades, for example, relied mainly on immigrants in the 1880s.³ By that time many trades were becoming less dependent upon immigrant labour than they had been, but nevertheless the proportion of native born amongst them was generally lower than amongst the population as a whole. British immigrant influence was particularly clear amongst the leadership of the craft unions. This influence was also taken into the early Labor Party. Amongst the first 35 Labor Party members of parliament in New South Wales in 1891, over two-thirds were immigrants (mainly from the British Isles), when two-thirds of the population were native-born. Fifteen of the 20 British-born Labor members of parliament were working men, mainly tradesmen, in contrast to only six of the 12 native-born, and whereas all 15 of these British-born workers were unionists, only three of the native-born members were.⁴

e.g. Operative Plumbers' Trade Society, *Rules*, Sydney, 1862 (all in Mitchell Library, Sydney, hereafter ML). Further examples occur below. Apart from the secondary sources referred to below, the general comments in this section of the paper are based on a perusal of the rules and minute books of unions of the stonemasons, printers, bakers, coopers, boot tradesmen, confectioners, tinsmiths, engineers, and glass bottle makers, all held at the Archives of Business and Labour, Australian National University.

³ J. Grant (NSW Stonemasons' secretary) in *RRCS* 1891, *Precis of Evidence*, p. 244; K. Buckley, 'Emigration and the Engineers, 1851-87', *Labour History*, no.15, November 1968, pp. 36-7; J. Hagan, *Printers and Politics. A History of the Australian Printing Unions, 1850-1950*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1966, pp.1, 22; R. T. Fitzgerald, *The Printers of Melbourne. The History of a Union*, Pitman, Melbourne, 1967, pp. 7, 9; B. Ellem, *In Women's Hands? A History of Clothing Trades Unionism in Australia*, University of NSW Press, Kensington, 1989, p. 21.

⁴ T.R. Roydhouse and H.J. Taperell, *The Labour Party in NSW. A History of Its Formation and Legislative Career*, Edwards, Sydney, 1892; Bede Nairn, *Civilising Capitalism. The Labor Movement in NSW, 1870-1900*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1973, pp. 62-3.

Coghlan emphasises the close contact maintained between colonial unions and their British counterparts as late as the 1880s and 1890s.⁵ The *History of Capital and Labour*, which was produced by Sydney unions in 1888, referred affectionately to the 'mother country', although it was otherwise stridently nationalist in tone.⁶ Craft unionists, such as bakers and carpenters, commonly referred to the 'old country' as late as the 1890s.⁷ The Sydney printers even based their calculation of wage rates upon the 'London scale' in the early 1880s, and their constitution was clearly modelled upon that of the London Society of Compositors of which it had many copies. This was common practice amongst the colonial craft unions.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the colonial craft unions were modelled very closely on their British counterparts, in terms of structure, strategy and tactics, ritual and regalia. As in the 'home country', colonial printers were organised in workplace-based 'chapels', and stonemasons in 'lodges'. Two major Australian unions in the nineteenth century were actually branches of British unions: the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (ASCJ) and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE). The Australian branch of the ASE, which became subsequently the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) from 1920, was formed on board the ship which brought its first 26 members to Australia in 1851. The AEU formally maintained its British links until 1968.⁸

⁵ T. Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, (Oxford, 1918) Macmillan, Melbourne, 1969, vol. 3, . 1475, vol. 4, pp. 1833-6.

⁶ J. Norton (ed.), *The History of Capital and Labour*, Oceanic, Sydney, 1888.

⁷ For example: NSW Operative Bakers' Society Monthly Meeting Minutes, 14 May 1892 (ANU); H. Wilkinson (ASCJ secretary), *RRCS* 1891, *Precis of Evidence*, p. 279.

⁸ K.D. Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers in Australia, 1852-1920*, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, 1970, p. 1.; T. Sheridan, *Mindful Militants. The Amalgamated Engineering Union in Australia, 1920-72*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975, p. 1.

The ASE and the ASCJ typified what the Webbs called the 'new model unions' which emerged from the 1850s in Britain as a result of amalgamation of a number of more sectional and localised societies. They were characterised by a degree of centralised national administration, a consolidation of extensive benefit policies and funds, a judiciously sparing use of the strike weapon, and the attempt to wield political influence in favour of labour through Liberal parliamentary members and participation in parliamentary inquiries. They were instrumental in the formation in 1860 of the London Trades Council, which they dominated for some years. The 'new model' unions have been typically contrasted with the more traditional and militant localised craft societies, associated with George Potter and the *Beehive* newspaper.⁹

These structures were replicated to a large extent in the colonies, with many colonial unions even adopting the 'Amalgamated' title of the 'new model' unions. However, there were virtually no national craft union organisations at the end of the century. Craft unions were organised on a colonial basis, which meant in effect that they were based in capital cities, where most of the population and industry of the colonies was concentrated. As some other towns developed in the colonies, branches of these organisations were also established there, as

For printers' organisation generally, see Hagan, *Printers and Politics*, and Fitzgerald, *Printers of Melbourne*.

⁹ See S. and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism, 1666-1920*, London, 1920, chs. 4-5; H. Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1963, pp. 50-92; G.D.H. Cole and R. Postgate, *The Common People, 1746-1946*, Methuen, London, reprint of 4th edn. 1966 (1938), pp. 369-78; D. Kynaston, *King Labour. The British Working Class, 1850-1914*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1976, pp. 17-29; R. Gray, *The Aristocracy of Labour in Nineteenth Century Britain c. 1850-1914*, Macmillan, London, 1981, pp. 46-50; D. F. MacDonald, *The State and the Trade Unions*, Macmillan, London, 2nd edn. 1976 (1960), pp. 25-34; E. M. Hunt, *British Labour History, 1815-1914*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1981, pp. 264-8.

well as in the industrial suburbs of the capitals in some cases (notably the ASE and Stonemasons' Society). Most of these operated with a high degree of autonomy, particularly because of the tyranny of large distances in the colonies.¹⁰ To this extent, the colonial craft organisations contrasted with the more centralised national basis of organisation of the British 'new model' unions, and resembled more the localised societies which gathered around the *Beehive*. Indeed, the Sydney Trades and Labour Council (TLC) maintained contact with Potter and subscribed to his the *Beehive* newspaper in England in the 1870s.¹¹ However, in fact the 'new model' unions were not entirely centralised in the modern bureaucratic sense, and the *Beehive* unions had also moved closer to the 'new model' unions by the 1870s. As in the colonies, there was considerable variation in standard wage rates between different localities, and a high degree of local governmental autonomy within the national or colony-wide organisational framework.¹² What both colonial and parent bodies shared was a high degree of participatory democracy in locally-based organisations, with strong foundations in the assertive self confidence of an aristocracy of labour.¹³

¹⁰ See R. Markey, 'Trade Union Democracy and the Labor Party in NSW, 1880-1914', *Historical Studies*, vol. 22, no. 86, April 1986, p. 75 J. Child, *Unionism and the Labor Movement*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1971, pp. 32-46; Ellem, *In Women's Hands*, pp. 7-28; and see sources in n. 5 above.

¹¹ Sydney Trades and Labour Council (hereafter TLC) General Meeting Minutes (ML), 12 July 1871, 16 September 1874, 25 March, 23 September, 16 December 1875, 1 June, 7 September 1876.

¹² H.A. Clegg, A. Fox, and A.F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889. Volume 1: 1889-1910*, Oxford University Press, London, 1964, pp. 7-10; Gray, *The Aristocracy of Labour*, pp. 47-8; Hunt, *British Labour History*, pp. 259-63; R. Price, *Labour in British Society*, Routledge, London, 1986, p. 85.

¹³ There is a vast British literature on this topic since E.J. Hobsbawm's 'The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth-century Britain', *Labouring Men. Studies in the History of Labour*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1964, ch.15. Much of this literature has been reviewed in E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Debating the Labour Aristocracy', and 'The Aristocracy of Labour Reconsidered', *Worlds*

One of the hallmarks of the craft union was the strong benefit policy, equally in Britain as in the colonies. In fact, the need to consolidate funds for this purpose was a greater incentive for the 'new model' unionism than bureaucratic centralisation. Many of the other characteristics of the 'new model' may have been more exaggerated. For example, their avoidance of the strike weapon did not mean a lack of militancy necessarily, but indicated a more strategic use, the success of political lobbying over some major issues of the time, and the strength of the unions such that they did not need to engage in strike action to gain their objectives. Similar observations have been made of Australian craft unions of the nineteenth century.¹⁴

Perhaps the most distinctive strategy of the craft unionism which the colonies inherited from Britain was the system of apprenticeship, which regulated the growth of labour supply to help maintain a scarcity of skill which could demand high remuneration. It has been observed that because of skilled labour shortages apprenticeship in Australia was never as rigidly enforced as in Britain, and even where it was, that colonial apprenticeships were often shorter than in Britain. Furthermore, by the end of the nineteenth century apprenticeship was declining in many colonial trades.¹⁵ Yet, even in Britain it seems that a high

of Labour. Further Studies in the History of Labour, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1984, chs. 12-13. The critical and empirical Australian literature has been far more sparse, but see R. Markey, 'The Aristocracy of Labour and Productive Re-organisation in NSW, c.1880-1900', *Australian Economic History Review*, XXVII:1, March 1988, pp. 43-59.

¹⁴ R. Markey, 'New Unionism in Australia, 1880-1900', *Labour History*, no. 48, May 1985, p. 20; and *The Making of the Labor Party in NSW, 1880-1900*, University of NSW Press, Kensington, 1988, p. 150. For Britain, see sources in n. 9 above.

¹⁵ The evidence is extensive in a number of government reports and inquiries, e.g. T. Bavister (Bricklayers' president), P. Dow Master Builders' president), J. Grant (Stonemasons' secretary), G. Long (ASE president) and J. Talbot (Ironmoulders' president), *RRCS* 1891, *Precis of Evidence*, pp. 216-17, 225, 244, 263; *Reports Under the Census and Industrial Returns Act of 1891*,

proportion of craft union members had also entered the trade in non-traditional manner. The point was that the union still exerted rigorous control of entry to the trade and skill.¹⁶ In order to maintain this against the pressures of unemployment in a fluctuating labour market, many of the colonial unions also adopted the 'tramping' system of their British counterparts, whereby if the local labour market was 'slack' local societies or union branches paid members a tramping allowance to move on to areas where there was work, or if there was not, the local societies there would pay them again to move on.¹⁷

Apart from these structural and strategic considerations, colonial unions clearly borrowed the British working class 'rituals of mutuality' which have been so elegantly described by E.P. Thompson.¹⁸ The craft unions' nineteenth century rule-books offer many examples. Here we find frequent reference to 'fraternity' and 'mutual benefit', 'mutual protection', 'mutual support' and 'mutual interests' of organisation. The collective ethos also expressed in 'unity', 'combination', and 'solidarity', and symbolised by the display of linked hands or the bundle of faggots in many colonial union documents clearly linked them with their British counterparts. Many unions had their

Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of NSW, (hereafter VPLANSW) 1891-2, vol. 7; evidence of J. Farr (builder) before Select Committee on Assisted Immigration, VPLANSW, 1880-1, vol. 3, p. 756. See E. Fry, 'The Condition of the Urban Wage Earning Class in Australia in the 1880s', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Australian National University, Canberra, 1956, pp. 374-85.

¹⁶ Kynaston, *King Labour*, p. 19; Price, *Labour in British Society*, pp. 74-5.

¹⁷ NSW Typographical Association, *Rules*, 1882 (ANU); NSW Pressmen and Stereotypers' Union, *Constitution and By-Laws*, 1888 (ANU); Operative Stonemasons' Society of NSW Central Committee Minutes, 5 August 1870 (ANU); NSW Amalgamated Tinsmith' and Sheet Iron Workers Trade Society General Meeting Minutes, 7 September 1888, 2 September 1892, 29 November 1893 (ANU).

¹⁸ *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972 reprint (1963), pp. 456-68.

'doorkeepers' for meetings, some their 'tyler', and job representatives were called 'shop stewards' as in Britain. The entire language of unionism was imported from Britain.

Coal miners' unions, which began from the 1860s in Newcastle (New South Wales), were also closely modelled on British organisational forms. As with their counterparts in the Mother Country, these unions were very localised, and based on the pit organisation, the 'lodge'. This is hardly surprising, since the proportion of British immigrants amongst coal miners was also significantly higher than the population as a whole. Employers commonly recruited labour in Britain, especially during strikes. Union leaders were usually of British mining stock, and the unions maintained contact with their British counterparts. Indeed, in many respects the Australian mining communities were an extension of those in Britain, with northern British miners concentrating in the northern New South Wales district of Newcastle (County of Northumberland), and Welsh miners concentrating in the western New South Wales coalfields district of Lithgow (with pit names such as Vale of Clwydd). Local mine managers were as likely to be British immigrants as their men, and also kept close contact with their counterparts 'at home', and with their methods. Patterns of industrial and social behaviour and workplace organisation learned by both miners and managers in Britain were transported to New South Wales.¹⁹

¹⁹ Hunter River District Delegate Meeting Minutes (ANU) throughout the 18970s indicate regular contact with British unions, especially warning of the labour market situation and mining strikes in Australia, but also encouraging emigration often. See R. Gollan, *The Coalminers of NSW. A History of the Union, 1860-1960*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1963, pp. 2-3, 17-18; E. McEwen, 'The Newcastle Coal-Mining District of NSW, 1860-1900', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sydney, 1979, p. 264; E. Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, Australasian Coal and Shale Employees' Federation, Sydney, 1970, pp. 16. 18, 49. Alan Walker noted the persistence of strong British links in the

By the 1870s craft and coal miners' unionism were well-established in the colonies. In that decade they were joined by unions of seamen, wharf labourers and metal miners in the Amalgamated Miners' Association (AMA) in Victoria. These forms of unionism flourished in the colonies at the same time when British unionism also underwent considerable growth, based largely on the crafts and miners. However, the consolidation of colony-based seamen's and wharf labourers' unions in Australia preceded the continuous organisation of these groups in Britain, where sporadic, localised organisational efforts did not lead to continuous association in national unions until the end of the 1880s.²⁰ In many respects, the colonial seamen and wharf labourers' unions foreshadowed the new unionism of the 1880s.

The formation of the Melbourne Trades Hall Committee in 1856 also anticipated British workers' formation of trades councils. In Britain the earliest appears to have been the Glasgow Trades Council in 1858, followed by the London Trades Council in 1860, and a number of others soon afterwards in industrial centres such as Manchester.²¹ Until 1883 (when it became the Trades Hall Council) the Melbourne body essentially functioned as a building management committee. However, the coming together of the various trades even for this limited purpose was noteworthy at such an early stage. Even more so was the establishment of a fully-fledged peak council, the Sydney Trades and Labour Council (TLC), in 1871, so soon after the appearance of such organisations in Britain. Similar bodies were formed in other colonial capitals from the early 1880s.²² It was significant

1940s, *Coaltown. A Social Survey of Cessnock, NSW*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1945, pp. 3, 86.

²⁰ Webbs, *History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 405-6; Pelling, *History of British Trade Unionism*, pp. 70-91; Markey, 'Australia', pp. 588-90.

²¹ Pelling, *History of British Trade Unionism*, pp. 54, 63-4.

²² J.T. Sutcliffe, *A History of Trade Unionism in Australia*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1967 (1921), pp. 63-4; R. Markey, *In Case of Oppression. The*

that these organisations were known as 'trades and labour' councils in the colonies. The difference in name indicated contradictory tendencies: first, the preservation of the distinction between tradesmen and labourers, which imitated British craft exclusiveness; but secondly, it indicated the recognition of at least some common organisational interests. The colonial addition to the names of these peak councils suggests that this recognition of common interests had gone somewhat further at this point in the more egalitarian colonies, and, indeed, the miners and maritime unions did affiliate to the councils at an early stage. This, and the conscious organising efforts of the colonial labour councils amongst the less skilled, indicates a somewhat broader base than their British counterparts.²³

Changes to labour law in Britain in the 1870s may have assisted in the consolidation of trade unions, and these changes were subsequently enacted in the colonies. The 1871 British Trade Union Act gave legal status to unions. Some strict penalties were also abolished or diluted for 'molestation', 'obstruction' and related offences, which severely restricted traditional union activities such as picketing during strikes.²⁴ British statutes were commonly enacted in the colonies soon after their enactment in Britain, whilst decisions in British common law were automatically applicable in the colonies. However, there was always a time-lag in application of British statutes. The first colonial Trade Union Act was passed in South Australia, but the New South Wales and Victorian versions were not enacted until

Life and Times of the Labor Council of NSW, Pluto, Sydney, 1994, pp. 3-4.

²³ Markey, *Making of the Labor Party*, pp. 153-4.

²⁴ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, pp. 43-47; Hunt, *British Labour History*, pp. 266-71; MacDonald, *State and Trade Unions*, ch.3.

1881 and 1886 respectively.²⁵ Colonial regulation of the employment relationship through the Master and Servants Acts was also actually harsher than in Britain. These Acts provided for up to three months gaol and confiscation of wages for misconduct, such as disobedience or breach of contract, commonly arising out of absconding or desertion of a job before discharge by an employer. Strikes could be interpreted as either disobedience or desertion by the courts. Nevertheless, the colonial application of labour legislation was uneven, and never seriously or consistently hindered the growth of unionism.²⁶

NEW UNIONISM

In the 1880s colonial trade unionism underwent tremendous expansion amongst previously unorganised semi-skilled and unskilled workers. New mass unions enrolled shearers and rural workers, metal miners, railway workers and navvies, and coal miners' and maritime workers' unions expanded dramatically. In the cities gas, brewery, road transport, and clothing and textile workers, including women, also unionised. Even older craft unions expanded at this time. In the most populous and industrialised colonies of New South Wales and Victoria trade unions covered

²⁵ Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics*, pp. 79-80; Markey, *Making of the Labor Party*, pp. 121-2.

²⁶ A. Merritt, 'The Development and Application of Master and Servants Legislation in NSW - 1845-1930', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Australian National University, 1981; A. Merritt, 'The Historical Role of law in the Regulation of Employment - Abstentionist or Interventionist?', *Australian Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1982, pp. 60-4; Markey, *Making of the Labor Party*, pp. 122-8; J.W. Turner, 'Newcastle Miners and the Master and Servants Act, 1830-62', *Labour History*, no. 16, May 1969, pp. 30-6.

about 22 and 20 per cent of the workforce respectively. These union density rates were higher than anywhere else in the world.²⁷

In Britain also, unionism spread to the unskilled in the late 1880s. One of the earliest sparks was ignited by the 1888 strike of women match workers at Bryant and May in London. In the following year London gasworkers and dock labourers also organised, and these were soon followed by gasworkers, dockers, woollen workers and general labourers throughout the country.²⁸

There were a number of similarities in the nature of union growth in both Britain and the Australian colonies. This was indicated in the shared use of the term 'new unionism' by contemporaries in both Britain and the colonies.²⁹ Apart from anything else the term indicated a tremendous upsurge in the level of unionisation generally. In Britain membership of the Trades Union Congress, to which most of the new unions affiliated, increased by 650,000 or 80 per cent.³⁰ In Australia the level of growth was of lesser magnitude, but dramatic nevertheless. Total union membership in New South Wales doubled from 1885 to

²⁷ Markey, *Making of the Labor Party*, pp. 137-46; J.C. Docherty, 'The Rise of Railway Unionism. A Study of NSW and Victoria, c. 1880-1905', unpublished M.A. dissertation, Australian National University, 1973.

²⁸ See Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, pp. 55-65; Kynaston, *King Labour*, pp. 136-43; MacDonald, *The State and Trade Unions*, ch.4.

²⁹ See T. Mann and B. Tillett, *The New Trades Unionism: A Reply to Mr George Shipton*, London, 1890; and G. Howell, *Trade Unionism New and Old*, London, 1907. For Australian usage consistent with the British, see evidence of a number of participants in the RRCS 1891, notably T. Hay (general secretary of Australasian Institute of Marine Engineers), and W.G. Spence (general secretary of Shearers' Union), Minutes of Evidence, Q1831-Q1835, Q9598, Q9697, Q9699. Also Spence in *Amalgamated Shearers' Union Report of 6th Annual Conference* (hereafter ASU 6th AR, etc.) February 1892, p. 6; ASU 7th AR, February 1893, p. 13; ASU 8th AR, February 1894, p. 5; and A. Rae (Shearers' Union branch secretary) quoted in Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics*, p. 179.

³⁰ Hobsbawm, 'The "New Unionism" in Perspective', in *Worlds of Labour*, p. 157.

1891, to 60,000, and Victorian union growth was similar.³¹ Many of the workers who were organised for the first time were similar in both countries, especially gasworkers and general labourers. In both the British and colonial cases this rapid growth was associated with an upsurge in industrial disputes, which led contemporaries and historians³² to characterise the new unions as more militant than their craft predecessors. The labour movement in both countries became more susceptible to socialist influences and interested in independent political organisation, eventually leading to the formation of the Labo(u)r Parties. In Engels' words: 'These new trade unions of unskilled men are totally different from the old organisations of the working-class aristocracy and cannot fall into the same conservative ways'.³³

However, a substantial body of revisionist literature has indicated that the stereotype of new unionism cannot be clearly maintained in practice. They were not consistently more militant than craft unions in either country, if that term means a greater willingness to take strike action. The greater level of strike action with which they were often, if not always associated, may be explained in many individual ways, but it is clear that a major determinant was simply the fact that employers did not recognise these new unions as bargaining agents. After that recognition was gained, British and colonial new unions tended to become less

³¹ Markey, *Making of the Labor Party*, pp. 139-40; Docherty, 'Rise of Railway Unionism'. pp. 184-93.

³² MacDonald, *The State and Trade Unions*, ch. 4, is particularly wedded to the traditional stereotype. In Australia: L.G. Churchward, 'Introduction' in R.N. Ebbels (ed.), *The Australian Labor Movement, 1850-1907. Extracts From Contemporary Documents*, Lansdowne, Melbourne, (1960) 1965, pp. 13-17; Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics*, pp. 99-109; I. Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1965, pp. 9-14.

³³ Quoted in Kynaston, *King Labour*, p. 137. See also F. Engels, 'Preface to the English Edition', 1892, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1980 reprint, p. 36.

industrially active. On the other hand, it may be observed that strong craft unions frequently had the strategic bargaining power to achieve their ends without strike, although they were perfectly willing to employ this weapon where necessary. Similarly, the revisionists have observed that the consistency of socialist influence and political orientation in new unions is insufficient to justify the stereotype, and that many craft unions were subject to socialist influence and inclined to independent political organisation of labour. In the colonies the craft-union dominated Trades and Labour Councils took the main initiative in the formation of the Labor Party, particularly in New South Wales and South Australia.³⁴

Aside from the similarities in stereotype and revision of it, the phenomenon of new unionism in Britain and the colonies shared a number of other characteristics which have received less attention. First, through a process of consolidation, the major examples of new unionism in both countries went on to become general unions and the largest unions in the country. In Britain, the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Labourers Union which had begun amongst the London dockers under the leadership of Tom Mann and Ben Tillet, became the Transport and General Workers' Union; and the Gasworkers and General Labourers Union led by Will Thorne in 1889 became the General and Municipal Workers Union. They have been, respectively, the first and second largest British unions since the 1930s. In Australia, the Amalgamated Shearers' Union (ASU) of 1886 became the Australian Workers Union (AWU) in 1894 when it expanded its coverage to include all rural workers,³⁵

³⁴ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, pp. 87-96; Kynaston, *King Labour*, pp. 136-43; Hunt, *British Labour History*, pp. 304-7; Markey, 'New Unionism'. The Webbs were skeptical of the stereotypical distinction between 'old' and 'new' unionism from an early stage, *History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 386-420.

³⁵ For convenience this union is referred to as the AWU throughout this article, even prior to 1894.

and in the twentieth century it moved far beyond its rural base to enrol metal miners, factory workers and many others. For many decades after its formation the AWU was the largest union in Australia, and in some states remains so today.

However, although the language of 'new unionism' was shared in both countries, by contemporaries and later historians, it did not denote entirely the same thing. In the first place, colonial unionists used the term more loosely than was common in Britain. For example, amongst other things, one considered that new unionism was distinguished by the attempt to enforce a closed shop, another by attempts to gain an eight hour day,³⁶ but both policies had been actively pursued by craft unions. Spence, the AWU's president, claimed that new unionism was distinguished by 'mateship', 'co-operation', 'brotherhood', and the 'ideal of the lowly Nazarene'.³⁷ Clearly, the term could be used to refer to any of his or other contemporaries' predilections, without necessarily bearing a close relationship to the British paradigm.

There were also more substantial differences. The spread of new unionism was greater in the colonies, and also covered a greater array of occupations, including rural workers. Indeed, the expansion of colonial unionism occurred slightly before its British variant. In a curious reversal of the colonial relationship, the Australian unions played a major part in assisting the consolidation of their brothers' and sisters' organisation in Britain. During the 1889 London dock strike, colonial unionists organised a massive contribution of \$60,000 (30,000 pounds) from Australia, which enabled the dockers to continue their

³⁶ Hay, *RRCS* 1891, Minutes of Evidence, Q9598; Spence, *ibid.*, Q1835.

³⁷ W.G. Spence, *The Ethics of New Unionism*, Sydney, 1892; *General Labourers' Union Report of 3rd Annual Conference*, March 1893, p. 7. The GLU was formed by the Shearers' Union with which it amalgamated to form the AWU.

struggle until victory was attained.³⁸ Political organisation was also far more substantial at an early stage in the colonies, where the Labor Party emerged as a major parliamentary force as early as the 1890s, and achieved government in 1910, nationally and in the state of New South Wales. Conversely, the political ideology of the colonial new union leaders was far less influenced by Marxism, even amongst those who called themselves socialists.³⁹

In important respects colonial new unionism was unique. This was best demonstrated by the Shearers' Union. It included significant groups of members who were independent from wage labour for part of their working time, either as small farmers or as independent miners. The largest single group of shearers, which formed the backbone of the AWU in the late nineteenth century, consisted of small farmers and their sons. They comprised about 35 per cent of the workforce, but were concentrated in the Central and Eastern Divisions of New South Wales and in Victoria, where most branches of the union were also located. Itinerant, landless bushworkers predominated in the west, and in Queensland where they organised in a separate union until 1904. The remainder of the shearing workforce, most of which was only needed for three months of the year were urban workers, metal miners or prospectors, and even New Zealanders.⁴⁰

Many of the metal miners or independent prospectors who shored sheep were members of the AMA which expanded dramatically in the 1880s from its Victorian base into New South Wales, with 10,000 members at its peak at the Broken Hill silver/lead mines. The Broken Hill mines also experienced a high degree of turnover, in part because their workforce included a significant proportion of itinerant bushworkers or even farmers

³⁸ See P.F. Donovan, 'Australia and the Great London Dock Strike: 1889', *Labour History*, no. 23, November 1972, pp. 17-26.

³⁹ Markey, *Making of the Labor Party*, ch.8.

⁴⁰ J. Merritt, *The Making of the AWU*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 42-52.

working for wages for a short time when needs were greatest, particularly during droughts. Many AMA members were also semi-independent men working on contracts in Victorian gold-mines, and/or moving between prospecting in the countryside and wage labour. In the living memory of many of these miners the Victorian and New South Wales goldfields had been operated by independent diggers hoping to strike it rich, until the working out of the easily accessible alluvial lodes of ore had required deeper mines, greater levels of capital and larger company operations which displaced independent mining from the 1870s.⁴¹ The unionisation of these independent, or semi-independent men by the AWU and the AMA has few, if any, parallels in the world. The AWU and AMA were also the largest and most significant organisations to emerge from the upsurge of unionisation of the 1880s.

These unions departed significantly from the previous colonial and British forms of labour organisation in other important ways. With only one exception, the seamen's union, they were the first national labour organisations in Australia. Of course, the New Model craft unions were organised on a national basis in Britain before this, but it is difficult to compare British and Australian unions in this way, because until the federation of the colonies in the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, each colony was rather like a separate country. Colony-based unions in Australia were in a sense the equivalent of national unions in Britain in the nineteenth century. National organisation of unions in nineteenth

⁴¹ See G. Blainey, *The Rush That Never Ended. A History of Australian Mining*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2nd edn. reprint 1974 (1963), pp. 60, 100-2, 134, 138, 188-90, 195-7, 203-5, 250-1, 255-6, 294; G. Blainey, *The Rise of Broken Hill*, Melbourne University Press, 1968; W.G. Spence, *Review of the First Ten Years' History of the Creswick Branch, No. 3, AMA of Australasia*, Creswick, 1888, pp. 3, 7-8; W.G. Spence, *Australia's Awakening. Thirty years in the Life of An Australian Agitator*, Worker Press, Sydney, 1909, , pp. 19-20; Markey, *Making of the Labor Party*, pp. 67-9.

century Australia, therefore, required a special impetus, since such organisation not only faced vast distances, but significant differences in legal, political and economic frameworks between colonies. Given the nature of their industry, it is not surprising that the seamen should be the first to attempt an intercolonial or genuinely national level of organisation, in 1876, eleven years before a national seamen's union appeared in Britain. However, until 1906 this was really a loose federation of existing colony-based unions without any national office or resources.⁴² The AMA was not dissimilar. Although it had a national executive, its various branches outside Victoria, notably that at Broken Hill, functioned virtually as autonomous bodies, joined largely through a benefit fund.⁴³

The AWU was the exception in that it was formed as a national organisation from the outside, albeit with a separate Queensland union not amalgamating until 1904. It operated with a strong branch structure, but the principal seat of power and resources was at the national level. Branches handled recruiting, employed their own organisers, and could initiate special projects such as production of newspapers. In practice, they sometimes varied national policy to suit local conditions, but they could not negotiate separate wage agreements. Branches could provide a power-base for critics of the national leadership, but they were not sufficiently autonomous to seriously challenge the ultimate authority of head office, and on occasions in the 1890s where branch and national leadership were in dispute, the national

⁴² B. Fitzpatrick and R. Cahill, *The Seamen's Union of Australia, 1872-1972. A History*, Seamen's Union of Australia, Sydney, 1981, pp. 1-11, 32-3.

⁴³ AMA *General Rules*, Ballarat, 1884; AMA *Lewis Ponds By-Laws*, 1890; AMA NSW No. 2 Colonial District, Rules as submitted to RRCS 1891, Literary Appendix, p. 136; Spence at RRCS 1891, *Precis of Evidence*, pp. 25, 41. See Markey, 'Trade Union Democracy', p. 82; B. Kennedy, *Silver, Sin and Sixpenny Ale. A Social History of Broken Hill, 1883-1921*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1978, pp. 30-3, 51-60.

office was able to exert its authority over the branch, even removing the leadership of the branch in one case (amidst charges of poor or fraudulent financial management).⁴⁴ This relatively centralised national structure was the original basis for the AWU's organisation, in contrast with the British new unions which originated as local organisations which later coalesced.

Even when the colonies federated to form the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, most unions remained organised on a state basis. The formation of a Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration in 1904 provided an impetus for national organisation, since under the terms of the Commonwealth Constitution, the Commonwealth Court could only exercise jurisdiction in interstate industrial disputes. Favorable judgments in the court, particularly from 1907, strengthened that impetus, such that by 1912 there were 72 interstate unions, and in 1919 there were 95 accounting for over 80 per cent of all unionists.⁴⁵ However, virtually all of these organisations were really federations of State-based unions, the remnants of the old colony-based bodies, which conducted most union business and have remained the primary locus of union power and resources ever since. This only serves to emphasise the uniqueness of the AWU at the time.

The structure of the wool industry and the consequent itinerant nature of much of the AWU's membership were largely responsible for its organisational structure. A large labour force was only required for a short period during the shearing season. The season itself moved, with the workforce following it, generally starting in the west and moving eastwards and southwards. In New South Wales this meant that urban workers who came out for the season, and eastern small farmers shore their way

⁴⁴ *ASU Rules*, 1887; *AWU Rules*, 1894; Markey, 'Trade Union Democracy', pp. 82-4.

⁴⁵ *Commonwealth Labour Reports*, nos. 9, 13.

eastwards, in the direction of their home. Similarly, Victorians started their season in New South Wales and shore southwards towards home. Many shearers often moved between Victoria and South Australia as well.⁴⁶ A union covering this workforce could have been organised on little other than an intercolonial basis. It also encouraged the first trade union bureaucracy in Australia.

As much as anything else, the AWU was distinguished from old unionism by its centralised, bureaucratic structure. No other union had anything like the AWU's expenditure (at least 50 per cent of income) on officials' salaries, office rent and equipment, even less, and investment in their own buildings to which the AWU aspired in the late 1890s.⁴⁷ Nor did any other union leader articulate such definite views on the importance of strong, central leadership as W. G. Spence,⁴⁸ who was AWU president from 1886-1916, except for the years 1894-8 when he was general secretary. These tendencies were not effectively countered by the somewhat legalistic elaboration of democratic procedure in AWU rules.

The original organisational impetus amongst shearers had been localised, as shown by a number of short-lived efforts from 1868. But none of these achieved cohesion amongst a transitory workforce in which a working community was slow to develop. Even in 1886, despite the emergence of a wider shearing community by then, local groups at first organised spontaneously in at least five New South Wales districts, until absorbed into a central organisation in a little over one year.⁴⁹ There was a striking parallel with Spence's earlier unification of a number of

⁴⁶ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 35-8.

⁴⁷ See summary of expenditure in W.G. Spence, *History of the AWU*, Worker Print, Sydney, 1911, p. 119.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 120; ASU 6th AR, February 1892, p. 7.

⁴⁹ *Burrangang Argus*, 22 May 1886; 'History of the AWU' in *Shearers' Record* (ASU journal), 15 April 1890; *Burrangang Argus*, 22 May 1886; Spence, *History of the AWU*, pp. 15-18; Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 92-8.

independent Victorian metal miners' unions into the AMA in Victoria, of which he was also president until 1894.

The method of consolidation, with professional organisers emanating from the centre, immediately cast the union in a centralised mould. The central executive was powerful, and effectively very small, for only the president and secretary were full-time; and vice-presidents, usually branch officials from all over the country, were only irregularly present at head office. The branches themselves were centralised bureaucracies, operated in the absence of an itinerant membership by full-time officials whom Spence described as 'managers rather than mere clerks'.⁵⁰ From 1892 central, as well as branch, officials were elected by postal ballots collected at the various branch headquarters, but many organisers were also appointed rather than elected. In three years during the 1890s ballots for national officers were suspended in favour of appointment by conference. This centralised bureaucratic structure was confirmed by the itinerant nature of the workforce, much of whom could only be active union members for a maximum of four months in the year, as well as the intercolonial spread of the industry and the large number of employers.⁵¹

Annual conference was the AWU's ultimate policy-making body. However, it was essentially a gathering of branch and central bureaucracies. Conference delegates' numbers grew from six to 34 over 1887-91, but thereafter declined to seven in 1898. Fifteen union members could constitute a general meeting, entitled to forward resolutions to conference, but there was little use of this power. Referendums were required for major policy decisions, such as political commitments, special projects and levels of

⁵⁰ Spence, *History of the AWU*, p. 121, and also pp. 16, 20-1, 26 ff.; Spence, *Australia's Awakening*, pp. 47-9; *General Meeting of ASU*, Ballarat, 16 April 1887, Presidential Report, pp. 3-4.

⁵¹ Markey, 'Trade Union Democracy', pp. 83-4.

subscriptions, but the leadership defined the parameters of the questions and had the union's resources to present its case. Even then, it did not always heed the results. Referendums were also technically required for general strikes, which occurred in 18901 and 1894, except in 'extreme emergency' when a two-thirds majority of the Executive Council could call a strike. in practice, referendums were never held for strikes, especially because the time factor made them impractical for such a large, diversified membership.

None of the rank-and file members' more direct contacts with the bureaucracy amounted to participation in decision-making. Travelling organisers from head office and the branches represented the leadership going to the rank-and-file. They were not part of a two-way process. Only a small number of organisers were employed, so that their contact with individual shearers' groups was brief. Recruiting agents were necessary because organisers could not reach the entire workforce at the beginning of the season. Based in townships as shopkeepers or other businessmen, or tradesmen, the agents merely collected shearers' subscriptions as they passed through, in return for a commission. AWU rules described the branch general meeting as the 'highest branch authority', but these were only held annually, and itinerant shearers experienced difficulty in attendance. This tended to entrench the influence of the less itinerant small farmers, and even local storekeepers and others attended branch meetings.⁵²

The AWU warrants this detailed attention because it provides such a great contrast with previous unionism, and because it had such a significant impact on labour organisation from the 1890s. It was on this structural level more than anything else that Australian new unionism could be distinguished from older forms, insofar that the AWU was the most significant and distinctive

⁵² ASU *Rules*, 1887 and 1892; AWU *Rules*, 1894; Spence, *History of the AWU*, p. 12; Markey, 'Trade Union Democracy', pp. 85-6.

example of it. Union bureaucracies had generally not emerged by 1900 amongst the crafts, nor indeed amongst the coal miners' district-based unions, nor the seamen and wharf labourers, or most of the other new unions of the 1880s. The localised basis of organisation for most of these unions facilitated a high degree of participatory democracy. Officials, usually elected directly at well-attended annual general meetings, were virtually always part-time still in this period, other than in the railways and miners unions which had full-time district secretaries (and president in the case of the AMA). Even the Sydney Trades and Labour Council (TLC), the most substantial peak council of this era, did not employ a full-time secretary until the late 1890s. The more centralised form of organisation typified by the AWU became more important for the labour movement from the early 1900s, caused by a number of factors, especially the sheer growth in membership, and the demands of the system of compulsory state arbitration.⁵³ The AWU not only led Australian unions in this area, but also the British new unions, which also went to develop significant bureaucratic structures as they consolidated as general unions.⁵⁴

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AWU

The AWU became the largest and most influential of all Australian unions, especially when it began enrolling beyond its rural base and became a general union from the late 1890s. However, as early as 1890 it accounted for a third of all unionists in New South Wales, that is, about 20,000. From this position, it exerted tremendous influence upon Australian labour organisation. This influence was strengthened when most unions

⁵³ P.J. Brennan (TLC secretary), *RRCS 1891, Precis of Evidence*, p. 88; Markey, 'Trade Union Democracy'.

⁵⁴ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions*, p. 95.

were decimated by the ravages of depression, strikes and employer assaults in the 1890s. Many of the new unions collapsed altogether, but the AWU's structure survived relatively intact, even though it lost many members.⁵⁵

The significance of the AWU's influence was threefold. First, as we have seen, it was dominated by small landholders, unlike any other labour organisation. Secondly, it was dominated by the native-born, and adopted a nationalist and republican ideology, which was hostile to British imperialism. These two characteristics were linked in the AWU.

The identification of the Australian labour movement with nationalism and republicanism has been well-documented by Australian historians,⁵⁶ without paying much attention to the special role of the AWU. At the 1888 Intercolonial Trades union Congress the 'Federated Republic of Australia' replaced the loyal toast as the object of three cheers, and the 1891 Labor platform included 'federation [of the colonies] upon a national as opposed to an imperialistic basis'.⁵⁷ However, in these early years the AWU was the major bearer of these ideological tendencies in the movement. Republicanism gave Australian nationalism a perspective of class conflict, because of the close links between the British and Australian ruling classes, and because of the colonial role of British capital, particularly in the pastoral industry.⁵⁸ The *Australian Workman's* claim that British capital lay behind the 1894 shearers' strike over wage cuts, had considerable validity given the banks' foreclosures and direct management of

⁵⁵ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, p. 138; Markey, *Making of the Labor Party*, pp. 141, 158-70.

⁵⁶ For example, Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics*, especially ch.7; H. McQueen, *A New Britannia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1970, especially ch. 1.

⁵⁷ Plank 12, Markey, *Making of the Labor Party*, p.208. For 1888 Congress, see Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics*, p. 119.

⁵⁸ Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics*, pp. 114, 119; B. Fitzpatrick, *The British Empire in Australia*, Macmillan, Melbourne, (1941) 1969, pp. 71-101,117, 123-4, 130n., 132, 159, 272.

properties in the 1890s, for British capital had provided a large proportion of local banks' resources.⁵⁹ The AWU's press condemned 'British bondholders' and 'English merchants and paupers who worship trade and money bags'.⁶⁰

'In spirit', Spence claimed, Labour was already federating in 1890, and 'socially such organisations as the AWU and AMA were doing even more than the politicians to extend the federal feeling and to help on the great movement which will eventually make Australia one great nation'.⁶¹ As Ward has shown, the bushworker became the symbol of Australian nationalism at this time.⁶² Correspondingly, the AWU was strongly committed to the ideal of republican nationalism: 'the complete political independence of the United Australian Commonwealth on a basis of pure democratic Republicanism'.⁶³ In language similar to *The Bulletin*, which also idealised the bushworker as a nationalist symbol, *The Hummer* railed against the young Australian nation being 'chained to a corrupt and decaying corpse'.⁶⁴ In 1892 Arthur Rae, a branch secretary of the AWU, distinguished himself as the only member of New South Wales parliament to oppose condolences to Queen Victoria over the death of the Duke of Clarence.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ 5 and 12 June 1897. This was the journal of the Sydney TLC and NSW Labor Party.

⁶⁰ *The Hummer* (journal of the Wagga Branch of the Shearers' Union), 5 December 1891, 13 February 1892; *The Worker* (journal of the AWU), 22 February 1898.

⁶¹ AWU 9th AR, February 1895, p. 32; 'President's Address', ASU 4th AR, February 1890, pp. 5-6.

⁶² R. Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, (1958) 1970, chs. 7-8.

⁶³ 'Our Platform', *The Hummer*, 1891-2.

⁶⁴ 'For the Honor of the Flag', *The Hummer*, 13 February 1892. Examples from *The Bulletin* include: 'Australia for the Australians', 2 July 1887; 'The British Imperial Heathen', 2 August 1888.

⁶⁵ Markey, *Making of the Labor Party*, p. 209.

Idealisation of the national character, and of Labour's contribution to it, was common in radical literature. Norton wrote in the *History of Capital and Labour* in 1888 that:

Labour from the first marked Australia for its own. It is the country upon which the old European systems have had the least influence; as it is the country where the new institutions have taken the firmest hold in the national character and life of the people. It is moreover, a country the foundations and structures of whose constitutions were laid and built by labour, and it is the country where the whole fabric of society is being perfected by the same agency.⁶⁶

This perspective rested upon a traditional radical theme, on the possibility in Australia of excluding the class distinctions and conflict of the Old World. The symbol for this aspiration became the Eureka Stockade of 1854, where over 30 Victorian gold miners were slaughtered by troops as a result of widespread defiance of governmental authority. The Stockade was built as a defence against government troops after 10,000 miners formed the Ballarat Reform League to agitate for reform of goldfields administration and a democratic program including representative government via a secret ballot, payment of members of parliament, a universal suffrage, and one vote per person.⁶⁷ Most of this program was actually achieved in the next few years after the Stockade, but it, and the flag of the southern cross which flew over the Stockade, became symbols of republican nationalism. Significantly, the Labor Party took the Eureka flag's blue and white as its colours.

⁶⁶ 'Introduction', p. ix.

⁶⁷ See K.S. Inglis, *The Australian Colonists*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1974, pp. 191-205; Ebbels, *The Australian Labor Movement*, pp. 36-8, 42-51.

However, republicanism was not strong throughout the working class. At the foundation in 1884 of the Democratic Alliance, a radical group preceding the Labor party, one speaker 'refused to cheer the Queen, and avowed himself a republican, earning for his pains "a volley of groans and hisses" from the honest working men present and ... barely escaping physical injury'.⁶⁸ Many unions (including even the AWU) persisted in toasting the Queen at gatherings in the 1880s and 1890s. Even in Wagga Wagga, stronghold of the AWU and parliamentary seat for Arthur Rae, his action over the Duke of Clarence earned condemnation from a rowdy public meeting.⁶⁹ The Republican Union, formed in 1887, seems to have been largely a middle class affair, indicating that republicanism was somewhat tangential to the class mobilisation which occurred in the late 1880s.⁷⁰

The AWU became the centre-point of Labor's republican nationalism, and quite self-consciously inherited the Eureka tradition. As a consequence of the nature of AWU membership, a populist social base was imparted to Labor's republican nationalism. Populism was inherent throughout the political expressions of republican nationalism: in the Eureka Stockade, with its social base of miners seeking social and economic independence, in the Democratic Alliance's attempted linking of workers, farmers and manufacturers, in the republican *Bulletin's* small producer radicalism.

The third significance of the AWU's influence was that the early Labor Party relied upon it to deliver a large proportion of rural seats, as a result of its size and structure. Although industrially it also declined during the 1890s depression which wreaked such havoc on other unions, the AWU's branch structure, with travelling organisers, was well-suited to giving it a

⁶⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 January 1884.

⁶⁹ K. Swan, *A History of Wagga Wagga*, City of Wagga Wagga, 1970, p. 163.

⁷⁰ Markey, *Making of the Labor Party*, p. 39.

number of rural political bases. In New South Wales in 1891 thirteen of Labor's 35 parliamentary seats were rural, in areas mainly subject to AWU influence. Table 1 shows the continued importance of rural seats thereafter to 1938. By the end of the 1890s and until 1910 the rural proportion of Labor's seats was closer to half, and from 1910 to 1910 rural seats were the largest of the three categories. Each time when Labor formed government, in 1910, 1913, 1920, 1925, and 1930 it relied to a significant extent upon increases in its rural vote. Up until at least the mid-1920s, the AWU was the principal organiser of this rural vote. Indeed, during the 1890s when it was weakened industrially by the context of depression and the employers' assault on wages, conditions and unionism, the AWU became primarily a political rather than an industrial organisation.⁷¹ The bush unionist who, in contrast to the 'apathetic city folk', would travel thirty miles on foot or up to 200 miles on horseback to register a vote became a legend.⁷²

This importance to the early Labor Party gave the AWU a powerful position within it. From 1895, after a brief split between the AWU and Labor Party in 1894, the AWU's representatives effectively shared the leadership of the New South Wales party with professional politicians who had largely displaced the urban unionists who originally formed the party through the TLC. Up until the 1920s it exerted control over the biggest single bloc of votes at annual conferences of the New South Wales branch of the ALP. In Queensland, the only other colony/state where Labor established a significant parliamentary presence in the 1890s, the situation was similar (although the rural Queensland unions did not amalgamate with the AWU until 1904-5). Through the influence of these major Labor states, and the AWU/QWU in

⁷¹ *ibid.*, pp. 182-89; J. Hagan and K. Turner, *A History of the Labor Party in NSW, 1891-1991*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991, pp. 33-58.

⁷² See Spence, *Australia's Awakening*, p. 148.

them, the federal party was also strongly influenced by the AWU, especially since it too relied on a significant proportion of rural seats.⁷³

As a result of its position in the Labor Party, especially in New South Wales, the AWU exerted tremendous influence on Labor policy in the late 1890s and after. As the major bearer of colonial republican nationalism, the AWU was also largely responsible for imparting this ideology to the Labor Party, which became the traditional exponent of nationalism in Australian politics. The ALP also adopted policy for encouragement of small farmers from an early stage. This was clearly influenced by the AWU's 'Land for the People' political program, which built upon traditional colonial radicalism in its desire to redistribute land to smallholders.⁷⁴

One of the other main impacts upon Labor policy from the AWU was its adoption of White Australia as an ideal. 'The cultivation of an Australian sentiment based upon the maintenance of racial purity' became the first federal objective of the ALP in 1900. The labour movement had long had an attachment to racial exclusion prior to then; an attachment which has been well-documented by historians.⁷⁵ With the approach of federation of the colonies in the 1890s, the employment of Melanesian or 'Kanaka' labour in the Queensland sugar cane plantations became a prominent political issue throughout the colonies. However, after the success of legislation which severely

⁷³ Markey, *Making of the Labor Party in NSW*, pp. 187-90; D. Murphy, R.B. Joyce, and C.A. Hughes (eds.), *Prelude to Power. The Rise of the Labor Party in Queensland, 1885-1915*, Jacaranda Press, Milton, 1970; Hagan and Turner, *History of the Labor Party in NSW*, pp.

⁷⁴ Markey, *Making of the Labor Party*, pp. 298-305.

⁷⁵ Except where otherwise indicated, the following argument concerning the White Australia policy is based upon R. Markey, 'Race and Organised Labour in a White Settler Society: The Australian Case, 1850-1901', in M. van der Linden and J. Lucassen (eds.), *Racism and the Labour Market. Historical Studies*, Peter Lang, Bern, 1995, pp. 360-64.

restricted the entry of Chinese to other colonies, such as that of New South Wales in 1888, racial policy was not a major concern for most unions. The urban labour press actually paid scant

Table 1
Geographical Distribution of Labor Seats In NSW
Legislative Assembly, 1891-1938

<u>Election</u>	<u>Rural</u>	<u>Urban</u>	<u>Mining/ Industrial</u>	<u>Total</u>
1891	13	16	6	35
1894	5	5	5	15
1895	4	7	7	18
1898	7	5	7	19
1901	11	10	4	25
1904	13	6	6	25
1907	14	10	8	32
1910	20	17	9	46
1913	17	23	9	49
1917	8	20	6	34
1920	16	22	7	45
1922	12	18	7	37
1925	17	22	7	46
1927	7	24	11	42
1930	14	30	11	55
1932	0	14	10	24
1935	3	16	10	29
1938	3	17	10	30

Sources: Spence, *Australia's Awakening*, pp. 154-8, 163-4; C.A. Hughes and B.D. Graham, *Voting for the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, 1890-1964*, Department of Political Sciences, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, 1975; Hagan and Turner, *History of the Labor Party in NSW*, pp. 260-63.

attention to further restrictive immigration legislation in New South Wales in 1896. This seems strange when one considers that in the same year White Australia appeared in the Labor Party platform, unless one is aware of the role of the AWU.

As it came to wield its influence over the Party, the AWU became the main exponent for Labor racism in the 1890s. *The Hummer* spoke in extreme terms matched only by the republican nationalist *Bulletin*:

... the camels must go; the chows must also leave: and Indian hawkers must hawk their wares in some other country. This country was built expressly for Australians, and Australians are going to run the show.⁷⁶

AWU platforms called for total exclusion of all non-whites well before the Labor Party, and inclusion of this plank in New South Wales Labor's 1896 platform came soon after the AWU's re-entry to the party on very favourable terms after the 1894 split. When restrictive legislation was passed in 1896 and 1901 in New South Wales, it was criticised in AWU circles for not being forthright enough.

A strong racial policy was attractive to the AWU partly because its members, and especially those of its sister union in Queensland, the QWU, had more contact with Chinese and other non-white workers than most urban workers. Nonetheless, the virulence of AWU racism far exceeded the extent of job competition which its members faced from non-whites. AWU racism was fundamental to the union's entire rationale, its populist ideological predilections with republican nationalism and land reform, and to its populist social base. In its self-conscious inheritance of the radical Australian tradition born on the goldfields, the AWU inherited not only republican nationalism

⁷⁶ 31 October 1891.

and a commitment to small producer independence from wage labour, but also racism with which these ideals had been integrally linked since the 1850s gold rushes. Inheritance of this tradition, and these ideological linkages were natural outgrowths of AWU membership.

The AWU and the agrarian theorists and literati such as William Lane and Henry Lawson and *The Bulletin*, had inherited the radical populist vision of a proud new nation which had shaken off the Old World's yoke of class division. The vision's backbone was the strong, self-reliant, manly and morally upright white bushworker/selector, who could 'conserve those rights which in the old country they have allowed to fade out of existence'.⁷⁷ In the AWU's journal, *The Worker* and in *The Bulletin* cartoons depicting the class struggle regularly symbolised the worker in this way. Racial purity was an integral part of this vision, and it was threatened if the new Australian nation was swamped by 'inferior races' which were so close in their 'teeming thousands'. The Queensland socialist, William Lane, who edited the QWU's newspaper for a time, articulated the links between nationalism, racism and the 'yeoman' ideal in his theorising about the 'laws of nation building' and the 'race vigour' of the bushworkers. However, they were implicit throughout the utterances of the AWU's leadership at this time.

Finally, the AWU was one of the two major supporters of a system of compulsory state arbitration in the Labor Party, which adopted this policy at the end of the 1890s. It has been commonly argued that the labour movement as a whole adopted this policy as a result of the ravages of the depression, when employers effectively withdrew recognition of unions, and ignored the voluntary arbitration Act of 1892 in New South Wales.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ ASU 4th AR, February 1890, p. 8.

⁷⁸ Except where otherwise indicated, the following argument concerning the adoption of compulsory state arbitration is based upon R. Markey, 'Trade

Compulsory state arbitration apparently forced employer recognition of unions. From 1894 key members of the Labor party leadership proposed adoption of this policy. However, it was not until 1898 that the Labor Council adopted this policy, followed by the Labor Party in 1899. This was largely because the support for the policy amongst unions was quite weak, and sometimes openly hostile amongst socialists and the crafts. Labor politicians were committed to the potential of state arbitration to substitute 'the methods of reason, common sense and judgment for the methods of brute force'.⁷⁹ However, by themselves, they could not achieve commitment to the policy from the unions or the party, despite a number of attempts. Their momentum towards this eventual acceptance increased as the professional political leadership of the party was joined by the AWU from 1895.

The AWU's interest in compulsory state arbitration grew out of the immense organising difficulties it had faced even prior to the 1890s, with a part-time itinerant membership and a vast number of hostile employers. The resources required to cover an industry of this kind were beyond normal unions. Even if the major employers' association, the Pastoralists' Association, became less hostile to the AWU, its authority over all employers was limited. Compulsory state arbitration, therefore, ended the AWU's search for a stable bargaining framework. By the end of the 1890s compulsory state arbitration was one of the Labor Party's major policies, along with White Australia. As with the latter, the AWU's support was essential in the elevation of this policy in Labor's platform.

Unions, The Labor Party and the Introduction of Arbitration in NSW and the Commonwealth', in S. Macintyre and R. Mitchell (eds.), *The Foundations of Arbitration. The Origins and Effects of State Compulsory Arbitration, 1890-1914*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1989, pp. 156-77.

⁷⁹ W. Holman, *NSW Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 105, p.2227 (23 August 1900). Similarly, W. Hughes, *ibid.*, vol. 104, p. 1791 (9 August 1900).

Labor's arbitration policy was enacted in the early twentieth century, beginning with the New South Wales Act of 1901, and followed by the Commonwealth Act of 1904, even prior to Labor achieving government. This legislation signalled a new, interventionist departure from the role of the state which had been inherited from Britain. British unionists were not impressed with the degree of state regulation involved in the Australian system. Nor, at first, did this system nurture unionism generally.⁸⁰ However, the AWU largely prospered under compulsory state arbitration, and became organisationally dependent upon it. The system bred its own clients amongst unions eventually, and in that way fashioned the structure of Australian unionism to a considerable extent. It also fostered that symbiotic relationship between unions and the Labor Party, which became so distinctive of Australian laborism, since the Party was so important in shaping the legislative framework in which unions operated.

CONCLUSIONS

Australian unionism built upon strong foundations transported from Britain. Subsequently it grew beyond this base in scope and form. By 1890 the level of unionisation of the colonial workforce exceeded that in the mother country. This was mainly due to the upsurge of new unionism in the late 1880s. Although there were many parallels with the new unionism of Britain, the colonial variant was more extensive, preceded the British version and demonstrated its distinctive characteristics, such as a national

⁸⁰ See R. Adams and R. Markey, 'The Role of the State in Trade Union Growth: The Cases of North America and Australia,' in R. Fells and T. Todd (eds.), *Current Research in Industrial Relations. Proceedings of the 10th AIRAANZ Conference*, Perth, February 1996, pp. 6-16; P. Sheldon, 'The Missing Nexus? Union Recovery, Growth and Behaviour During the First Decades of Arbitration: Towards a Re-evaluation', *Australian Historical Studies*, no. 104, April 1995, pp. 415-37.

level of bureaucracy, earlier. Australian new unionism was also far more successful initially than its British counterpart in developing extensive parliamentary representation based on the organisation of a Labor Party.

The most significant example of Australian new unionism, the AWU, was also unique in many respects which led the Australian style of unionism further away from its British origins. The significance of small farmers in its membership certainly made it unique in the history of unionism anywhere in the world. They were an important contributor to the distinctive political policies of the AWU, notably its commitment to land reform in favour of small landholders, republican nationalism, white Australia, and compulsory state arbitration. Although there was other support within the labour movement for many of these policies, the AWU was clearly the strongest supporter of the first three, and in all cases its support was crucial in them becoming established Labor policy at the turn of the century. It is these policies which also made the ALP so internationally distinctive as a Labour or Social Democratic Party.

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